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EPA warns of possible water hazard

By Michael Wright

The Facts

Published August 23, 2003

FREEPORT — Bobby Jo Casale wishes he'd never bought the house.

Twenty years ago, when Casale and his wife, Stella, were looking for their dream home, they picked a site on the Intracoastal Waterway in Bridge Harbor. Now they're living next to a Superfund site.

"I had a new white car when I moved in," Casale said Friday at a meeting with Environmental Protection Agency officials at his home. "It turned yellow."

According to EPA documents, the old Gulfco Marine Maintenance facility next to Casale is leaching hazardous substances from the disposal site to the Intracoastal Waterway, "including semivolatile organic compounds, lead, zinc and pesticides." The agency believes the chemicals pose a threat to drinking water supplies.

The first step in the cleanup process is to find out which of a succession of owners is the responsible party.

"We're trying to find someone who owns the site," said Gary Miller, the EPA's project manager for the site.

No serious health effects have been linked to

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the contamination at this point, a Texas Department of Health official said, but the process is just beginning.

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"There will be a public comment period," said Nancy Ingram, community involvement liaison for the health department.

The Casales and their neighbors will have plenty to say when the time comes.

"I have muscle loss; he has nerve problems," Stella Casale said.

She added that she made her daughter quit work because her grandson, whom she baby-sat, was having medical problems.

Ingram said health department officials will continue to survey residents and will prepare a report detailing their findings to submit to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the EPA. The public will have a chance to comment on the report's findings, Ingram said.

"We will give our conclusions and any recommendations that we think might reduce any exposures to the TCEQ or EPA," Ingram said.

If the health department finds a health threat, Miller said, that could accelerate the remediation process.

Stella Casale said she's convinced something is going on.

"We had three animals die of leukemia," she said.

Once the EPA finds a responsible party, Miller said, the agency will begin assessing exactly what needs to be cleaned up and how best to do it.

"We'll follow the contamination if it goes into

the Intercoastal Waterway or if it goes off-site," he said.

Miller said there is no law preventing another company from coming in and resuming barge-cleaning operations at the contaminated site, but he doubts that will happen.

"Anybody that goes in there and operates, they're taking on Superfund liability," he said.

Michael Wright covers environmental issues for The Facts. Contact him at (979) 237-0151.

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